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"The Republic of Women": Notes Towards a Critical Assessment

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> The participation of women in public spaces; cinema as a means of reflection, and constructive debate.
> (slogan on flyers for "The Republic of Women")

"The largest change for us is a qualitative one, to learn how to think of power in feminine terms, without resorting to masculine codes,"[1] concludes a participant in "The Republic of Women," a year-long project aimed at raising consciousness around gender issues among women engaged in political and unionist activities in contemporary Argentina. Comments of a similar nature abound in the discussion sessions following the screening of *Salt of the Earth*, a 1953 American film about the plight of Mexican workers that helped the project's organizers foster a critical dialogue around gender constraints within different Argentinean organizations (Cartón Alvarez and Alonso Dávila 53). The female protagonist—Esperanza's on-screen transformation as she manages to make her "private" demands heard in the "public" sphere aids the women in the project to gain awareness about such constraints and imagine possible strategies for subverting them.

This article examines how women viewers of the film *Salt of the Earth* create through their viewing experience an "imagined community" with the potential for increasing social, economic, and political participation. "The Republic of Women" project approached the concrete life experiences of the attendants as a springboard for critical reflection upon issues raised by the films screened. I consider the social and economic realities of these women, as reflected in their responses, as the foundation for my reflection upon the dialogue between them and the film *Salt of the Earth*. Throughout the screenings, discussion and debate centered for the most part on women's symbolic on-screen representations and the correlation between such representations and viewers' perceptions of themselves. A focus on the audience's response will

therefore enable me not only to gauge the extent of gender constraints upon women's leadership in contemporary Argentina, but also to engage in dialogue with preexisting theory on female spectatorship. My analysis will show that the interpretive community created by *Salt of the Earth* further challenges dominant notions of female spectatorship, demonstrating the potential for a productive dialogue between spectator and film that enables political action. I will first introduce the project, and then briefly engage theories of female spectatorship pertinent to it. I will explore the community that was constituted in relationship to *Salt of the Earth*, together with the impetus to political agency characterizing that new community.

"The Republic of Women" took shape towards the end of 1997 as an initiative of Isabel Alonso Dávila and Pilar Cartón Alvarez. These feminist activists and scholars were volunteering at the time for the Argentinean NGO *Instituto de Género, Derecho y Desarrollo* (Institute of Gender, Law and Development). With the aim of generating "a participatory culture in terms of both quantity and quality" (Cartón Alvarez and Alonso Dávila 38), and following extensive research in the fields of feminist political theory and feminist film theory, they devised a methodology centered on the use of cinema as a tool for promoting gender equity and women's social and political participation. In 1998, with a grant from the Inter-American Development Bank, the coordinators scheduled thirty-one movie sessions with women involved in unionist, political or neighborhood organizations in four different provinces. The sessions had an average audience of thirty attendants, and were structured as follows: a) before the actual screening of the film, distribution of questionnaires among the women present assessing the extent of their economic, social, and political participation and leadership; b) presentation of the project by its coordinators; c) screening of the film; d) discussion and debate on issues raised by the film; e) distribution of evaluation sheets.

The organizers enlisted the help of schools, unions, libraries, and other organizations useful in targeting potential audiences for the project. In some cases, women who occupied leadership positions in organizations would volunteer to play a particularly active role in the movie sessions. This was especially true when more than one session was planned, since these women could introduce the session on the second day by reflecting upon their experiences with leadership. On such occasions, it was also possible to arrange the screening of several movies and devote the final session to comparing and contrasting the different ways in which similar issues were treated. At the end of this year-long project, a concluding session was held with the participation of all the organizations involved to assess both the immediate effects and the expected future results of the project.

Salt of the Earth was shown at eleven sessions throughout the duration of

the project. Directed by Herbert J. Biberman in 1953 and produced by the International Union of Mine, Mill and Smelter Workers, this film is based on an actual strike against the Empire Zinc Mine in New Mexico. Through the use of Esperanza's voice-over narrative, *Salt of the Earth* deals with the prejudice against Mexican-American workers who struck to attain wage parity with Anglo workers in other mines and to be treated with dignity by their bosses. While transcribing the discussions, I was surprised to discover that a black-and-white American movie from the 50s had been by far the most popular film of the entire project. My previous research on women's renegotiations of the public and private spheres immediately attracted me to "The Republic of Women," which I learned about upon meeting the organizers at a seminar on film. However, I joined the project not as a scholar, but simply as a participant in the early stages, interested in the topic as an Argentinean woman, and later became a collaborator in writing the *Memoria Final* at the end.

The studies carried out by Jacqueline Bobo in *Black Women as Cultural Readers* and Janice Radway in *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy and Popular Literature* provide parameters for the examination of audiences of *Salt of the Earth*. The close examination of black women's responses to *The Color Purple* and *Daughters of the Dust* aids Bobo in her theoretical assessment of "the broader framework" of "their lives, their history and their social activism" (24). In parallel manner, Radway seeks to "posit a representative reading process" that will enable her to ground her attempt to understand why and how women read Mills' and Boon's romances from the perspective of concrete lived experience, and it is this objective that prompts her to zoom in on "the composite [. . .] reader" (14).

My point is also to "posit a representative viewing process" with the ultimate aim of evaluating the potential of a project like "The Republic of Women" to foster among women viewers a sense of community likely to bring about long-desired change (Radway 14). Insofar as the aim of the project was to raise consciousness about problems surrounding the social and political leadership of women in Argentina, women's actual experiences needed to be addressed. It seemed imperative to avoid the traps of excessive abstraction and theorizing and focus instead on women's own voices, a gesture much like Radway's and Bobo's. The transcription of the discussions that took place after the films thus became of crucial importance to the project. Being in charge of this task afforded me invaluable insight into the issues at stake.

Together with a careful reading of the transcribed discussions, an evaluation of the questionnaires that the women completed reveals other important factors worthy of consideration. For most of the women viewers of "The Republic of Women," the difficulties they had experienced in entering the

public space were inextricably linked to the constraints they felt were imposed upon them by the domestic sphere. These women perceive domestic duties and/or their geographic location as the main hurdles to overcome for them to access leadership positions. The burden of household work often prevents their participation in political parties or trade unions. Furthermore, women in predominantly rural areas find fewer and less accessible avenues for such participation. These two facts help explain why the women viewers of *Salt of the Earth* identified with the female protagonist's renegotiation of the private/public dichotomy as the only means of validating herself and her desires.

One could therefore think of these women viewers as "a female social audience," to borrow Annette Kuhn's way of describing an audience that "presupposes a group of individuals already formed as female" (151).[2] Women could make sense of Esperanza's predicament, and use it to interrogate their own, by virtue of sharing with her similarly constructed social subjectivities. The comment "We, the women here today, are another Esperanza" sums up the audience's reaction to the film at the session co-organized with "Desde Nosotras," an NGO devoted to work on the rights of girls and women in the province of Tucumán (Cartón Alvarez and Alonso Dávila 45). Engaged in community projects of all sorts, the women of "Desde Nosotras" spend a large number of hours outside their homes, and can therefore relate to the obstacles Esperanza needs to overcome in order to have her own political experience. "When women take up the fight, work remains to be done," says another participant, alluding to the fact that nobody takes over domestic responsibilities when a woman takes a more active part in the public world of politics (Cartón Alvarez and Alonso Dávila 45).

Most women present at the above-mentioned session agree that it is actually when miners in *Salt of the Earth* have to do the housework themselves that they value women's non-salaried work at home and come to understand the validity of women's demands for better sanitation. When the miners are forbidden to go on picketing by a court injunction, it is their wives who replace them in "the public spheres of the union hall, the picket line, and prison, while the men are forced into the private sphere of kitchens and laundry lines" (Dittmar 401). This shift in the gendered division of labor fills both men and women in the film with uncertainty, for as a consequence, their larger gender identities are put into question. Women viewers in Argentina felt this transformation to be absolutely necessary in that it helped women realize they could indeed participate in the public sphere despite the "lack of time caused by household chores" (Cartón Alvarez and Alonso Dávila 46).

Linda Dittmar engages similar questions in her article "The Articulating Self" when she suggests *Salt of the Earth* makes "her [Esperanza] and other women's problematic relation to articulation serve as a trope for gender

relations" (398). Esperanza can speak up at the union hall only after she sees other women do so. Women in the audience voiced a similar feeling when they stated: "We're always at the back, elbowing each other to see who dares speak up at the front of the room" (Cartón Alvarez and Alonso Dávila 46). Women on and off the screen shared the discomfort brought about by their self-consciousness when asked to speak in public, a feeling caused by the strictly gendered modes of communication prevalent both in Argentina today and in the United States more than fifty years ago.

For Dittmar, the film locates "each gender within a broader critique of race, ethnicity, and social class in a postcolonial context," and it does so "by engaging spectators in a deciphering activity geared to promote ideals of equality" (Cartón Alvarez and Alonso Dávila 398). As the quotes above illustrate, this deciphering activity involved a translation of the film's relevance to the situation of the participants in "The Republic of Women," as suggested by the coordinators to the discussion leaders. At the session with "Desde Nosotras," Pilar opens up the discussion by alluding to the undoing of the public/private dichotomy that occurs in the film by saying, "The private world invades the public world, and the public world justifies itself only insofar as it improves life in the private sphere [. . .] and that's where women and men meet" (Cartón Alvarez and Alonso Dávila 45). Women viewers of *Salt of the Earth* are made to think of the two terms in the dichotomy as both overlapping and mutually enriching, rather than as separate and mutually exclusive spheres. Observing this familiar division under a new light enables them to imagine ways to enter the public domain without necessarily sacrificing the private realm.

An unusual viewing experience therefore is created for the women targeted by "The Republic of Women," one that will eventually lead them to gauge their own positions against that of the women portrayed by the film. By the same token, new and innovative possibilities open up for theorizing women as spectators, given that most existing criticism on female spectatorship focuses on soap operas and melodramas as the genres that "inscribe femininity in their address," to borrow Kuhn's words once more. She explores this idea further to suggest that "women—as well as being formed *for* such representations—are in a sense also formed *by* them" (151).

This statement might well apply to the female audience of *Salt of the Earth*, composed as it was of frequent viewers of mainstream Hollywood melodrama and the most popular television genre in Latin America, the *telenovela*. Women's responses to symbolic representations on the screen are shaped by the images of women perpetuated through all kinds of visual, as well as printed, media. As such, their responses tend to reflect very specific "interpretive conventions" that they have inherited and "learned to apply as a

member of a particular interpretive community" (Radway 11). Much like Radway's Smithton readers, women attending the sessions of "The Republic of Women" are equipped with interpretive conventions they have developed as viewers of soap operas and melodrama. Yet it is also fair to say that their responses are ultimately subject to slight modifications that result from their critical engagement with the film itself.

We can see an example of this in a session held in the province of Mendoza with a heterogeneous group of housewives, professionals, political leaders, etc., during which one of the attendants maintains she had a much harder time dealing with women than with men during her former political militancy (similar arguments occurred in several sessions). She states that, "Sometimes, when a woman occupies spaces of power, she is more unfair, she doesn't favor a woman, she favors men" (Cartón Alvarez and Alonso Dávila 78). However, another attendant, Aurora, is able to critique this comment, which is rooted in larger assumptions, common in popular representations of women, that women rarely act in solidarity with other women. Aurora feels opinions like these are embedded in us after years of having witnessed such behavior through the media. She summarizes her views by saying, "The proportion of women that reach [leadership positions] is so small that those vices or those qualities are seen immediately" (Cartón Alvarez and Alonso Dávila 78). The debate following the screening of *Salt of the Earth* has left Aurora feeling enlightened as to how our responses are generally conditioned by certain symbolic representations of gender we assume to be natural.

In this sense, what made this project unique is that it moved beyond traditional media conventions to constitute female audiences as targets of genres other than soap opera and melodrama. As one of the coordinators of the project herself suggested during one of the debates, the purpose of the project was to watch movies different from the ones we consume on a massive scale and to be able to reflect upon alternative cinematic representations. This was perfectly feasible in the case of a film like *Salt of the Earth*, both highly political and politicized.

It seems pertinent in this context to acknowledge the dire necessity of addressing women's concrete experience as it inheres in their behavior as film spectators, something "The Republic of Women" prioritizes by devoting half of the *Memoria Final* to the transcription of the discussions. Viewers' own voices therefore acquire preeminence and highlight one of the main dilemmas of research done on female audiences, as explained by Radway in her study of romance readers. For her, it is imperative to "conduct empirical research into the identities of real readers" if an accurate assessment is to be made of the interpretations they produce throughout the reading process (11).

Clearly enough, the assumptions that women viewers of *Salt of the Earth* brought to their viewing experience, based on their various identities as housewives or working-class women, also shaped the nature of their responses and immediate reactions to the film. Pilar addresses this issue when she reflects upon the presence of children in most of the screenings, a presence that sometimes even interrupts the debates. In her opinion, not only are women's responses shaped by their unique perception of the domestic sphere, but the domestic sphere also sets concrete limits on the extent of their participation in this project. At the session organized with the Union of Bank Clerks in Rosario, women echo this concern when they remember their failure in lobbying for the creation of a day camp for their children, and express their frustration towards their male co-workers in these terms: "Nobody wants to collaborate" (Cartón Alvarez and Alonso Dávila 115).

"The Republic of Women" considers the individual concerns of the spectators as well as their social locations. It thus avoids the trap of most studies on female spectatorship, that is, a failure to consider the audience as composed by individual subjects socially and historically constructed in very specific ways. Film scholar Jackie Stacey warns of this danger, a weakness ailing Film Studies as a field: "female spectatorship, rather than being a single, unified theoretical category, with little or no connection to history or to women in the cinema audience, can be understood [here] as a changing, dynamic and historically specific category" (34).[3] Christine Gledhill expresses a similar concern in her discussion of the term "female spectatorship":

> 'Female spectatorship' elides conceptually distinct notions: the 'feminine spectator,' constructed by the text, and the female audience, constructed by the socio-historical categories of gender, class, race, and so on. (67)

The project of "The Republic of Women" conceived of female spectatorship in similar terms—as communities specifically located historically and socially, but reflecting on that location via engagement with films depicting communities located differently than their own. Women participating in "The Republic of Women" engaged themselves in reflecting upon their own predicament in twentieth-century Argentina, and would repeatedly bring the reality depicted in *Salt of the Earth* back to their everyday struggle, reaching a compromise between their private/domestic self and their public/political/social one.

Despite *Salt of the Earth's* local and historical specificity, it allowed women viewers to relate to it almost immediately, since they felt the conflicts and tensions present in the film were still relevant today. For instance, Esperanza's argument with Ramón when he finds it difficult to accept his wife's autonomy

echoed similar arguments these women had gone through with their husbands at home. This issue came up at the session scheduled with "Movimiento de Mujeres en Lucha," an organization of women farmers in a rural community, Totoras. One of the attendants present at this session expressed her perplexity at the ease with which her husband accepted a political candidacy, despite the fact that she had been much more politically active. "Look at how easily he can occupy those spaces shamelessly, without any guilt," she said (Cartón Alvarez and Alonso Dávila 95). Women's participation in the world of politics signals once again a transgression of a naturalized division of the spheres, something these women were familiar with, having already started to participate socially in their communities. A man inexperienced in politics can move into the political space with ease, while his politically more experienced wife continues to feel that she must struggle to participate in the public sphere.

Female spectators in the afore mentioned audience could easily relate to the struggles portrayed by the film, in large part due to the way the character of Esperanza develops throughout the film. Gledhill describes "the female image" in *Salt of the Earth* as "an object of contest, of negotiation, for the characters and for the audience" (85). The female protagonist progressively gains the assertiveness she needs to be able to speak up at the union hall as she learns to define herself—no longer simply in relationship to her husband, but instead in relationship to other women. Esperanza takes on an active role among the women present at the union's meeting only after other women have done so and encourage her to do it. One of the coordinators, Isabel, made a point of highlighting this aspect in most of the sessions, drawing the viewers' attention to the way women are portrayed as friends and companions in the film, subverting the image of rivalry recurrent in most Hollywood mainstream cinema (Cartón Alvarez and Alonso Dávila 93).

The viewers began to negotiate between the symbolic representations of womanhood they were familiar with through the mass media, and the new image of womanhood with which the film confronted them. The words of one of the women present at the session in Máximo Paz show her surprise about this new viewing experience: "Women barely speak any more, not in commercials, not in movies, not in TV comedies" (Cartón Alvarez and Alonso Dávila 115). Máximo Paz is a small rural community in Argentina, and women present at this session were for the most part farm wives engaged in social/political activities, such as the production of a local radio program and organizing for agrarian reform, among others. The audience could therefore instantly relate to the changes brought about in the film by the presence of women on the picketing line, and the consequent readjustment of roles that ensues (Cartón Alvarez and Alonso Dávila 116). When women in the film take over the strike, their husbands feel they are being deprived of a leadership

they considered their exclusive property. Esperanza's husband, like the rest of his male companions, needs to struggle to find ways to deal with the new subject position acquired by his wife, which in turn re-locates his gender subject position as well.

Salt of the Earth presents its audience with relationships that are defined in and through patriarchy as Radway describes it, that is, "a social system where women are constituted only in and by their relationships to more powerful men" (10). What made the character of Esperanza so appealing to these women viewers was precisely the fact that she was able to escape and avoid such a trap, and instead constituted herself in and by her relationships to other women. Her awareness that, if women work together, they can make their demands heard, motivates her to defy her husband and, ultimately, the conventions of this patriarchal society. Unlike Radway's readers of romances who see "traditional institutions and structures" as "protective of a woman's interests" (75), viewers of *Salt of the Earth* saw in the film the prospect of dismantling such structures, of overturning the patriarchal system itself.

What sets this project apart from landmark studies like Radway's is, among other things, "the practices engaged by a particular text," borrowing Gledhill's words once more (75). Whereas the readers under Radway's consideration experience in romance fiction a world where "'independence' and a secure individual 'identity' are never compromised by the paternalistic care and protection of the male," for the viewers of the project under scrutiny here the reverse can be said to be true (79). In *Salt of the Earth*, women characters do not need paternalistic care and protection; in fact, what they need is to get rid of such notions to be able to advance their own demands at the union's meeting. It is precisely this trait that eventually changes the main character's relationship with her children, an aspect of the movie that especially drew the viewers' attention. They highly valued the fact that the film showed how the children saw their mother differently after her newly-acquired assertiveness.

It is interesting within this context to notice the contradiction between "seeing as opposed to being seen" explored by Mary Ann Doane (140). The character of Esperanza appropriates "the gaze" for herself. She is the one who sees: she sees what other women can do, she sees beyond men's solutions for other alternatives not to give up the fight for their demands (both their husbands' and their own). Indeed, it is her gaze that structures the whole film. Moreover, it is her appropriation of the gaze that signals her progressive transformation in the film. This transformation is exactly what enables her children to see her in a completely new light, and women viewers to identify with her gaze.

To audiences of "The Republic of Women," Esperanza's gradual transformation served as a springboard for reflecting upon their own

transformation after they had joined the different organizations, or lack thereof. As opposed to the women in the film who gradually "replace verbal diffidence with assertion" (Dittmar 402), women in the audience felt that fear, rather than diffidence, had prevented their speaking, and they saw the need to assert themselves as Esperanza and her companions do in *Salt of the Earth*. The organizations to which these women belonged in most cases helped the women to overcome their fears by empowering them to advance and validate their demands, for example, within political parties or at the level of municipal reforms. For a Bolivian woman present at the third meeting in the province of Catamarca, joining a group of women with similar concerns helped her overcome her shyness when it came to speaking in public. However, in response to a question by one of the coordinators, she confesses she would never run for an election, partly because she cannot read or write, partly because "there are a lot of people that speak more than one does and I feel bad, uncomfortable" (Cartón Alvarez and Alonso Dávila 67).

When it comes to entering the world of politics, few women dare to either head a ballot or support the candidacy of other women with the same political affiliation. Even in those instances when women felt confident enough to run for an election, their own allies within the political parties did not trust them and were therefore reluctant to support their candidacies. When Pilar asks one of the women in Catamarca if she believes the presence of women could change politics in any way, she replies: "Maybe, but one needs to be very careful in that respect, because when women start to think like men, they are sometimes worse than men" (Cartón Alvarez and Alonso Dávila 68). Female spectators of *Salt of the Earth* assume that the dynamic of political parties will continue to be shaped by men despite the incorporation of women. The film therefore faces them with an alternative reality that results from both men and women renegotiating this dynamic.

Such negotiations made Argentinean spectators closely identify with the character of Esperanza and adopt what Gledhill has termed "a gendered position of identification" (85). It could be argued that *Salt of the Earth*, like the Mills and Boon romances for Radway's audience, had a "therapeutic value" (Radway 85). Women viewers, like romance readers, vicariously experienced the validation and recognition of their autonomy and independence. "The plot's optimistic faith in collective action in the fullest sense" (Dittmar 399) appealed to the groups of women viewers in that what prevented, in many cases, their full engagement in political or unionist activism was the hierarchical and authoritarian structures prevailing in such milieus.

What brought these women together was, as with Radway's romance readers, not only a set of shared viewing/reading assumptions and interpretations, but also the fact that they all experienced an "assertion of

independence." For her, through the practice of reading romance literature women can assert an autonomy that is "normally undermined by their roles within households in which they are so frequently defined as being there for others" (210). In the case of "The Republic of Women," the space created both for viewing and for discussion was one of their own, free from the constraints of husband and household, where they could experience and enjoy independence and autonomy. The same was true of their participation in the organizations at large, where they could work "with women and for women to gain an egalitarian participation," in the words of one of the attendants. And yet, even though "women have the strength, when it comes to occupying positions, it's men that do so," she concludes (70).

"The Republic of Women" thus afforded women viewers in Argentina a rich ground for the development of an increased awareness of their predicament, and of possible ways of improving their situation. This ground was formed at the intersection of textual and extra-textual social practices where, according to Gledhill, it is possible to "distinguish the patriarchal *symbol* of 'woman' from those discourses which speak from and to the historical socio-cultural experience of 'women'" (75). The historical socio-cultural experience of women in Argentina today includes the fact that in 1996, the percentage of women economically active was 33.1%, as opposed to 55.6% of men. To that must be added domestic work which, as is well known, is unpaid and socially unrecognized. At the time the project originated, statistics revealed an overwhelming absence of women in parliamentary seats as well as in the Supreme Court of Justice, the glaring presence of only one as Head of a Ministry, no women in leadership positions either in trade unions or in the General Secretariat of Workers (CGT), and a low percentage of women actively involved in the country's workforce, among other things (Cartón Alvarez and Alonso Dávila 37). There appeared to be then, for these women, a disjuncture between what Esperanza and the other women could achieve in the film, and their own personal, everyday reality.

Whereas the evaluation of women's social and economic reality has allowed for the need to address their actual experiences (crucial to the objectives of the project), the examination of these same women by theorizing them as female spectators has permitted an understanding of the ways in which they transcend such experiences and relate to a reality (as depicted in the film) that is temporally and spatially distant. *Salt of the Earth* can be said in this respect to have served a role in creating a sense of community among the women watching it, which was facilitated by the continuity of experience established during the discussions. One could even go so far as to imagine a dialogue taking place between the different communities of women who saw the film. Indeed, in attempting to define communities, Benedict Anderson suggests

thus: "In fact, all communities larger than primordial villages of face-to-face contact (and perhaps even these) are imagined. Communities are to be distinguished, not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined" (6). Women in the different audiences imagine their community along similar lines as those of Esperanza's own community of women. A newly found sense of community is thus established across national borders and identities, defying geographical boundaries.

The women audiences discussed in this paper have actively appropriated for themselves an American film from the 1950s, turning the images on the screen into meaningful ways of understanding their own realities. In decoding and interpreting the different ways in which *Salt of the Earth* spoke to their own experiences, women viewers of "The Republic of Women" gained useful insight into the gender issues affecting their participation as leaders and decision-makers. Indeed, such participation revealed itself most of the time as an absence that was both disheartening and intimidating, as well as uncomfortable. It was this uneasiness triggered by the conflicts dramatized in the movie that eventually resulted in illuminating conclusions. Even women who had been politically militant admitted to having been "traveling companions," as it were, never allowed to run for an election themselves but collaborating instead behind the scenes.

The fact that our female spectators arrived at the conclusions outlined above, among others, speaks to their transformation into active participants in the construction of meaning that underlies any significant viewing process. Viewers were able at once to inscribe the immediate and personal into the collective and social, and to reflect upon their actual reality in such a manner as to generate possible ways of improvement.

Cinema in this context is then understood in Stuart Hall's terms when he defines it "not as a second-order mirror held up to reflect what already exists, but as that form of representation which is able to constitute us as new kinds of subjects, and thereby enable us to discover who we are" (714). Watching movies proved to help female spectators of "The Republic of Women" discover what their identities were and how they were socially and historically shaped, opening up new paths for further exploring such identities, and constituting new ones as active political agents.

This exploration led in turn to the search for alternative modes of social and political participation for the future, a search shared among women from the different organizations. Through the debates, women could also build bridges with other unions and associations that, until then, remained oblivious to the problematic of gender. In the province of Catamarca, for instance, the participating NGOs succeeded in obtaining the collaboration of the Teachers' Union in the organization of events on International Woman's Day. Despite

their previous repeated efforts at setting up a dialogue with this union, such collaboration was unprecedented and was therefore greeted with excitement by the different women involved. By the end of the sessions, women discovered themselves demanding the creation of more public forums for the discussion of these issues, as well as the approval of municipal, provincial and national measures enhancing their political representation. Women participants in Máximo Paz, for instance, had started planning the screening of other movies with discussions afterward with municipal support in the hope of working towards deeper and further effects within their community.

Instituto de Género, Derecho y Desarrollo strengthened the community of women thus formed by means of the creation of a directory readily available to all attendants, with the aim of providing them with networking opportunities. With a similar motive, it entrusted the coordinators with the writing of a memoir including the transcribed discussions, as well as the opinions gathered at the closing ceremony. The latter served as the occasion for all participants to share with the rest any changes that had taken place within their organizations following the screening of the movie. As was suggested above, most of them were already planning future sessions, several saw their membership increase in size, and new alliances were formed with other unions and organizations that until then had not organized around gender issues.

The main agenda of "The Republic of Women" was therefore a feminist/political one, that is, to raise consciousness among women in grassroots movements about the extent of their social, political, or unionist participation, with a view towards increasing their access to leadership positions and decision-making processes. Employing theories of female spectatorship to explore both the film and the NGO project of which it was part, we see that this agenda was advanced by favoring the formation of an "imagined community" through a viewing experience that made the women involved aware of their potential for future change and transformation.

NOTES

1. All translations of quotes from the transcribed discussions are my own and are taken from the *Memoria Final.*

2. Kuhn conceives of femaleness as a social gender, whereas femininity for her alludes to a subject position.

3. It seems relevant at this point to clarify the concepts of "spectator" and "audience," as defined by Annette Kuhn: "The spectator [. . .] is a subject constituted in signification, interpellated by the film or television text [. . .]. It is the social act of going to the cinema [. . .] that makes the individual cinemagoer part of an audience [. . .]. The concept of social audience, as against that of spectator, emphasizes the status of cinema and television as social and

economic institutions" (150).

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